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Academic Writing instruction – some missing links

Abstract: Building academic competence can be viewed as a long process of individual development, but academic writing skills at the university level are typically learnt rather than acquired. The need for effective instruction derives from the fact that students are expected to achieve a considerable level of academic English in a rather compressed time and that their success in this respect co-determines their overall results upon graduation. This paper discusses some of the challenges involved in teaching English academic writing in the Polish university context. In particular, it focuses on the following problem areas: students' lack of awareness concerning academic writing conventions in Polish; lack of explicit, course-based connection between reading and writing for academic purposes; and students' unwillingness to assume a dialogical, critical attitude towards sources. The paper ends with a suggestion that a remedy to some of the problems may be sought in approaches inspired by Academic Literacies, with their focus on raising language awareness, developing critical abilities, and fostering reflection on the social context of academic communication.

Keywords: academic writing, academic competence, writing conventions, language awareness, reading and writing for academic purposes.

1. Introduction

In comparison to the study of speech, the study of writing as a mode of communication has a short history. As Biber (1988) demonstrates, it was long seen not only as secondary to speaking but also as derivative of its norm, a mere record of the primary, spoken form of language (e.g., Bloomfield 1933; Fillmore 1981, quoted in Biber 1988: 6). A shift from the analysis of writing as "the objectification of spoken language"

(Aronoff 1985: 28) to the study of written communication patterns has been fuelled by a number of factors, including developments in the field of discourse analysis and text linguistics (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Brown and Yule 1983; Coulthard 1994; Hoey 2001), the evolution of the systemic functional perspective on language (Halliday 1994 [1985]; Couture 1986; Martin 1992), advances in genre analysis (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; Paltridge 1997), the growing body of corpus evidence for the existence of systematic differences between speech and writing (Biber 1988, 2006; Scott and Tribble 2006), and, last but not least, the increasing awareness of the extent to which people have come to rely on the written word in both daily and professional lives.

Naturally, the need of language users to write, and to write effectively, has also been recognised by applied linguistics and L2 pedagogy. Attention has been drawn to cross-cultural differences in writing practices (e.g., Kaplan 1987; Connor 1987, 1996; Connor and McCagg 1987; Hinds 1987; Mauranen 1993) and to specific features of spoken and written texts which function in particular settings, such as academic, business, or medical (e.g., Johns 1997; Swales 2004; Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007; Lu and Corbett 2012). Taking into account the current status of English as a lingua franca – now the most frequently chosen second language to learn and, according to Crystal (2003 [1997]), one that has three times as many non-native as native speakers – it is not surprising that the majority of second language writing studies deal with English writing practices (or, in the case of contrastive analyses, choose them as a point of reference). This dominance is perhaps particularly well visible in the academia; as Young (2006: 3) observes, "English has now become the Rosetta Stone of science, the language used to translate the science of the world into communication for the whole world."

The focus of this article is on English L2 writing in academic settings and, more specifically, on some of the challenges related to academic writing instruction for advanced students of English – future English language teachers, translators, or interpreters – in the Polish university context. This choice is motivated by the fact that written tests and essays are now the prevailing forms of assessment in courses and modules comprising English language programmes offered by Polish higher education institutions and that both first- and second-level English studies close with the submission of a diploma paper which each student is required to prepare in English. This means that both the success or failure in individual component courses during the studies and the overall assessment upon graduation depend not only on the student's subject matter expertise and preparation but, to a considerable extent, also on his or her academic writing skills, including the ability to apply effective

argumentation patterns as well as text organisation and editing rules. Moreover, apart from this short-term motivation, there is the recognition that the understanding of written communication practices and the ability to implement them may prove more than just a useful addition in the careers and professional lives of the graduates.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 introduces the concept of academic discourse and academicity in general, Section 3 outlines three popular or widely discussed approaches to the teaching of academic writing, and Section 4 attempts to identify sources of some of the persistent difficulties that emerge in teaching academic writing skills to Polish students who major in English. The final section hopes to identify areas where some improvements in the instruction may be suggested.

2. Academic discourse and academicity

In literature, academic discourse is often defined as communication in academic or research settings (Swales 1990; Paltridge 1997) or in academic environment (Gravett and Petersen 2007).[1] In the first issue of *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002: 2) define the scope of EAP as "language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts," thus drawing attention to the fact that there are various groups of participants in academic discourse, whose needs, interests, and practices may and actually do vary. This variation can be observed along many lines, perhaps the most salient ones being the role or position in the academic community (for instance, student or researcher), the culture and language of origin or education, the discipline, and the form of communication (for example, conference presentation or monograph). This demonstrates that academic communication is not a uniform but internally complex concept, shaped, among others, by the role and status of the participants, their cultural background, their dominant field, and the type of interaction. Navigating through these intricacies and "finding one's way" requires awareness of the factors contributing to this internal variation and

[1] Interestingly, Paltridge (1997: 2) refers to research settings as "the writing up and publication of the results of experimental research," thus narrowing down academicity to written communication and a particular methodological orientation. Although not universal or widely accepted, this view demonstrates the role of writing in the discussed type of discourse.

the ability to predict expectations of the audience arising from their specific combinations. Academicity is then a dynamic concept, a body of acquired competence and skills concerning how certain goals get accomplished successfully – a diploma paper is written, a lecture delivered, and research planned. Writing about postgraduate supervision, Petersen (2007) refers to academicity as a process of individual development and constant negotiation of category borders,

> the process through which identity is developed, negotiated and enacted as one gets an academic research qualification; engages with university courses, reads research literature, is required to present writing demonstrating scholarly thinking, interacts with supervisors and peers in scholarly ways and so on. (Petersen 2007: 477)

This short fragment captures two important elements: the developmental, processual nature of academic competences on the one hand, and the intrinsic connection between academic competences and communication on the other. In fact, it may be argued that the adjective *academic* presupposes discourse, as academicity cannot be acquired, developed, or practiced without it. It is negotiated and rehearsed through interaction with others, and effective patterns of interaction must be learned, just like field-specific facts, rules, and laws, to enable participation in the academic community.

The academic community is a prime example of a discourse community, a concept developed by Swales (1990) to refer to a grouping whose members share a set of goals and agree on the ways to pursue them. According to Swales (1990: 24–27), a discourse community involves the following elements: a shared set of goals, established mechanisms of communication among members, activity of members in terms of information exchange, development of genres which further the goals of the group, acquisition of specific lexis, and a hierarchy of membership. Thus, the patterns of communication applied in pursuit of the accepted goals identify the community just like the goals themselves, and a certain proficiency in their use is part of what counts as expertise of a member. Worth noting in this respect is the contrast between discourse and speech communities (Swales 1990). The latter centre upon a shared language and cultural background as the source of the sense of solidarity and belonging, membership in them is inherited and largely indisputable, and "qualifications" (that is, shared language) acquired during language development. By contrast, discourse communities rely on a broad consensus concerning accepted goals and legitimate ways

of attaining them, membership in them, as Johns (1997) points out, is voluntary and earned rather than inherited, and the qualifications – including communication models that serve the members to realise their goals – must be consciously learned by novices rather than acquired. In the case of academic community, these communication models comprise research and other professional faculty genres (Johns 1997), such as, for example, the research paper, the academic book review, the monograph, or the conference paper; pedagogical genres, such as the textbook and the lecture; and "school genres," including the essay examination response, the term paper, and the master's thesis (Johns 1997; Johns and Swales 2002).[2] A good grasp of relevant text types – the awareness of implicit expectations regarding their form, content, and delivery – is indeed prerequisite to academic success of an individual on various stages of his or her academic development. Hence, in university contexts, where students are required to achieve a certain level of academic competence – including the knowledge of and the ability to apply accepted patterns of interaction – in a fixed and relatively short period of time, effective and targeted instruction is particularly important.

3. Various models of student writing and writing instruction

Of the variety of writing and writing instruction models, this section will outline three: the study skills, Academic Literacies, and the English for Academic Purposes approach (EAP). All of them popular and well-established, these models vary widely in their main focus, have different strengths, and suffer from different limitations. For this reason, they often complement each other, helping the teacher to adjust the activities to the concrete teaching situation: the needs of the students, their linguistic competence, and their immediate expectations.

The study skills approach focuses on the development of technical skills, which are taught outside disciplines (Wingate and Tribble 2012). Strongly normative in nature, it offers instruction and guidelines concerning specific writing tasks, such as "essay writing" or "note-taking" (Wingate 2006). Depending on the learners' needs and advancement, the focus may be on language structures, text functions, or, most fre-

[2] This list is by no means complete; cf., e.g., Swales (1996) and Fortanet Gómez (2008) on some occluded academic genres.

quently, on the combination of the two. According to Hyland (2003), the focus on language prioritises teaching common-core (rather than disciplinary) academic vocabulary and lexical bundles, selected syntactic patterns, and lexical cohesive devices, thus largely limiting the perspective to the level of a sentence. The focus on text function, in turn, looks at text segments in terms of their specific purposes or functions, such as "exemplification" or "drawing conclusions," usually applying a paragraph-level perspective. Hyland (2003) observes that both, language focus and function focus, are product-oriented in that they rely heavily on text models and their reproduction, to the neglect of the broader context in which writing takes place, such as the intentions of the writer and the expectations of the reader. Moreover, a serious drawback of this approach is that, as Wingate (2006: 459) points out, "study skills are divorced from subject content and knowledge"; they ignore the fact that, on more advanced, university levels, academic writing is essentially disciplinary and that – again in its advanced forms – it generates knowledge rather than merely reproduces it. On the other hand, Hyland (2003) draws attention to important strengths of language and text function perspectives, which are effective tools in "scaffolding writing development" of novice writers, as they equip them with reliable resources to start writing, enable measurable progress (especially if time is limited), and reduce inhibitions that many L2 students experience when faced with a writing task.

The Academic Literacies approach has emerged in response to the growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of approaches modelled on study skills, which tend to ignore the contexts in which academic communication takes place, the inherent diversity of academic practices, and the very identity (or identities) of the writer (Lea and Street 1998). To quote Lillis and Tuck (2016: 30), it views writing "not only as diverse and situated in specific disciplinary contexts, but also as ideologically shaped, reflecting institutional structures and relations of power." Firstly, it draws attention to the fact that problems and difficulties experienced by L2 writers are not necessarily linguistic but more often epistemological, and that they frequently result from unawareness of what counts as knowledge, rational argumentation, and explicitness rather than from lacks in language (Wingate and Tribble 2012). Secondly, as Lillis and Tuck (2016) point out in their discussion of the key themes in Academic Literacies research, it emphasises the connection between writing practices on the one hand, and the disciplines and institutions in which they are embedded, on the other. Thirdly, the authors continue, it restores the importance of the identity of the writer, who brings to the text his or her own experiences, including encounters with other texts, beliefs concern-

ing the role and position of the academic author, and understanding of what counts as an academic contribution. This, in turn, calls for a non-normative perspective on academic writing. Rather than offered text models for analysis and reproduction, students are encouraged to challenge and negotiate academic conventions, developing a critical awareness of professed disciplinary values and practices (Wingate 2014). The important strengths of the Academic Literacies approach include the emphasis on the diversity and, in particular, the disciplinary context of academic communication, the practice- rather than product-oriented perspective on writing, and the prominence given to the critical awareness of the existing conventions and accepted patterns rather than to the need to copy them. However, as a research rather than pedagogic perspective, it offers fewer teaching solutions that could be immediately implemented in a writing class than the more normative models. Also, as Wingate (2014: 114) demonstrates on the basis of her three-part writing development project, "students need a firm understanding of the text and genre requirements in their discipline as a prerequisite for taking a critical approach to practices in the discipline." The author concludes that "the initial emphasis of writing instruction should not be on raising critical awareness, but on the features and requirements of texts an genres within the discipline" (Wingate 2014: 114).

The emphasis on genre requirements is perhaps the most salient feature of EAP now, although, as Paltridge (2001) points out, the initial focus of EAP teaching, until the 1960s, was closer to the study skills approach. Inspired by systemic functional linguistics (e.g., Halliday 1978, 1994), EAP looks at academic texts from the perspective of the functions they fulfil and sees the authors' choices in terms of steps taken to achieve particular goals (Hyland 2003). Thus, it takes into account the intentions of the writer, the type of audience addressed, and a range of constraints imposed, among others, by the amount of knowledge that can be assumed to be shared, expectations concerning the form and content, and various social conventions (e.g., the ways in which other authors and texts are referred to). Seen in this light, academic communication cannot be studied, practiced, or taught without taking into account the context in which it is taking place. Although the starting point for EAP writing tasks is often a text sample, first analysed and then used as a model of the text type the students are required to master, this approach often involves process-orientation, with emphasis on re-drafting and editing, and content-orientation, which, as Hyland (2003) observes, is invariably connected with reading and specific disciplinary knowledge. In sum, the writing instruction is here based on "the analysis of texts and explicit information about the genres that students

have to write, the major aim being to enable students to understand and control the discourses of their discipline" (Wingate 2014: 106). The main criticism of this genre approach to the teaching of writing is that, focused on text models, it tends to underplay the inherent variety of academic discourse and that it focuses on inducing students to adopt certain communicative practices rather than encourages them to critically reflect on them (Wingate and Tribble 2012).

It is important to note that the three models outlined above should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. As Hyland (2003) points out, most teachers tend to combine elements of various perspectives to gain full advantage of their strengths and minimise their drawbacks. Moreover, Lea and Street (1998) explicitly state that Academic Literacies encapsulate other, less context-sensitive models, including study skills. Finally, the telling title of Wingate and Tribble's 2012 paper demonstrates that writing instruction which combines the strong points of EAP and Academic Literacies is not unthinkable or infeasible (Wingate and Tribble 2012).

In the context of Polish universities and English writing instruction there, Reichelt (2005) reports that the interviews and discussions she held with writing instructors and university students leave no doubt that the now favoured approach to second language writing is process-oriented, with emphasis on sample texts, pre-writing tasks, and peer reviews, supplemented by intensive vocabulary, register, and grammar exercises. This suggests that, indeed, writing teachers at the university level tend to be eclectic in their teaching decisions, combining the communicative advantages of process-oriented activities with accuracy-focused work on language resources. The following section draws attention to some of the challenges that instructors are likely to face when teaching academic writing to Polish university students who major in English.

4. Some challenges of teaching English academic writing in the Polish university context

Of the various challenges that writing teachers and their students are likely to encounter, this section will discuss three which I consider some of the important missing links in effective academic writing instruction. These are: students' lack of awareness concerning academic writing conventions in Polish and systematic, recurrent features of Polish scholarly texts; lack of explicit, course-based connection between reading and

writing for academic purposes; and students' inability or unwillingness to assume a dialogical, critical attitude towards the sources they rely on in their writing tasks.

A major area of difficulty and a potential obstacle to successful academic writing instruction is students' lack of awareness concerning characteristic features and conventions of Polish academic prose. The problem is not new. For one thing, as Duszak (1998) points out, discourse studies and investigations into rhetorical patterns of academic communication were for a long time absent from the mainstream linguistic research in Poland. This means that while there is a long tradition of studying cultural differences in academic communication in general (see, e.g., Clyne 1987; Connor 1987; Hinds 1987; Kaplan 1987; Mauranen 1993), specific data concerning Polish conventions and patterns will be more limited (but see, e.g., Gajda 1982, 1990; Duszak 1994, 1997; Mikołajczak 1990; Golebiowski 1998; Wojtak 1999; Żydek Bednarczuk 1999). Secondly, the situation may partly result from the rather limited attention writing instruction has received in Polish schools. Comparing English and Czech traditions of academic writing, Čmejrkova makes the following remark:

> Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon tradition writing is considered a skill that can be taught, acquired, tested and qualified, in the Czech stylistic tradition the creation of texts is viewed rather as a result of an individual gift or talent. (Čmejrkova 1996: 142)

This observation appears to be valid also in the Polish context.[3] In recent years, however, the situation has changed and (junior) high school students do have principles of composition explained to them as part of their Polish language classes. Explicit instruction concerns in particular the general tripartite structure of the text students are required to write (small treatise, Pl. *rozprawka*), the importance of a thesis statement, and the need to invoke arguments.[4] Still, there is little recognition among high-school graduates of what distinguishes academic prose from a non-academic piece of writing in Polish, and still less of what constitutes a well-written academic text. Also, my discussions with third year students show that they are often not aware of, or prepared to reflect on, their own preferences as readers of scholarly texts in their L1, and so

[3] On the approaches to academic writing and writing tasks in Polish schools before the new version of the high-school leaving exam (Pl. *matura*), see, for example, Duszak (1998).

[4] I owe this information to discussions with second- and third-year students I had the pleasure to teach in the academic year 2016–2017 and to a small but very open and cooperative group of high-school informants.

it is difficult for them to verbalise expectations they have of academic writing and to confront them with the reality of English-language texts. Equally difficult it is for them to understand or anticipate expectations of others.

On a more technical side, the lack of awareness of what linguistic elements, rhetorical patterns, and writing conventions are characteristic of scholarly Polish makes it difficult to capitalise on the existing body of data concerning systematic differences between Polish and English academic writing or to develop a critical awareness of those points of contrast or similarity which may have been overlooked or underplayed in the research. Students may have declarative knowledge of the main features and principles connected with English academic writing, but the practical significance of this information is likely to escape them if there is no direct reference to corresponding functions or structures in Polish academic communication – if they are present there at all. This lack of a point of reference is what I consider a major missing link and an important challenge in the academic writing instruction.

Another element which may hinder the development of academic competence in the Polish university context is that teaching academic writing is commonly detached from academic reading. Often treated as a continuation of an earlier writing course (in study programmes also referred to as composition and usually taught during the first two semesters), academic writing tends to be perceived by students as just another writing class, which differs from the one they have already completed basically in the level of formality of the language used, more sophisticated vocabulary, and more demanding, intellectual topics. Thus, students are likely to expect heavy dictionary work and emphasis on advanced, embedded syntactic structures reflecting the complexity of the problems they are asked to consider. However, they are generally unprepared to think about their writing assignments in terms of making a point or sending a clear, convincing message to the reader. For this reason, they often remain unaware of the essentially dialogic and polyphonic nature of academic writing, that is, that writers are expected to make explicit references to information that counts as established knowledge (which can be plausibly assumed to be shared by the reader), discuss approaches or concepts more or less tentatively proposed by others (which, if known to the reader, need not be accepted by him or her or considered as valid), and situate their own ideas in this broader context. This side of academic writing tasks – the need to look for texts to converse with, to analyse them, and to enter into a dialogue with the concepts they present – tends to be underestimated by students writers and often reduced to a purely linguistic difficulty. In sum, even though

Coxhead and Byrd (2007: 133) affirm that "[a]cademic writing does not exist as a task on its own but is inextricably linked to the reading of academic texts," reading, analysis, and discussion are seldom recognised by students as essential prerequisites to effective academic writing; they are also not always explicitly present in syllabuses. Lack of awareness of this inherent relationship between writing and reading for academic purposes is, in my view, another missing link in developing academic writing skills.

The last issue considered in this section is closely related with the one discussed above. What frequently remains a problem even in advanced student writing is the way in which other sources are introduced and, in particular, the lack of critical, analytical attitude towards them. Many students express concern whether their paraphrases are substantial enough (Keck, 2006; Shi, 2012), that is, whether the distance they keep from the original wording will prevent accusations of plagiarism. At the same time, supervisors often express dissatisfaction with their students' drafts, especially with regard to citations. Firstly, the changes students make to the original texts are sometimes minimal and indeed local, which results in copying rather than paraphrasing (Marzec-Stawiarska, forthcoming). Importantly, this problem is not limited to English-language sources. When using a Polish-language source and aiming at a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation translated into English, some students prefer to remain dangerously close to the original, probably assuming that the change of language makes the text sufficiently different from the original. Secondly, many supervisors observe that what is supposed to be a problem-focused discussion of selected theoretical issues often transforms into a series of unrelated summaries, with the task of connecting them into a coherent whole left entirely to the reader. This shows that students may be more oriented towards displaying the information they have gathered rather than towards transforming it into knowledge that can be shared with the reader. Finally, it is a common observation among supervisors that students are generally unwilling to comment on the sources they quote in terms of their significance to the problem considered. Thus, other texts are invoked and properly referenced, but discovering in what ways they actually further the analysis or discussion of a particular research problem is, again, often left to the reader. These and related difficulties in paraphrasing, assuming a problem- rather than source-focused perspective, and taking stance towards other texts may be partly attributed to the fact that reading and text analysis are too seldom explicitly practised or emphasised as academic skills, and may pose another challenge in teaching writing at the university level.

4. Closing remarks

This article has sought to discuss some of the challenges involved in teaching English academic writing in the Polish university context. The problem areas outlined involve: students' lack of awareness of what elements are typical of Polish academic prose and of their own preferences and expectations concerning academic texts; the situation where teaching academic writing is often dissociated from academic reading and close text analysis; and difficulties many students experience with assuming an analytical, problem-oriented rather than purely descriptive attitude to sources they use. It seems that possible solutions to some of the problems may be found in the ideas promoted by the Academic Literacies approach, with its emphasis on the identity of the writer, self-reflection, criticism, and the social context of academic communication. What would seem particularly important is developing awareness of what constitutes an academic text in Polish, what features are typically associated with such texts, and what elements tend to determine whether an academic text in Polish is received as a piece of good or, conversely, poor writing. Next, what seems needed is reading, analysis, and discussion of English language disciplinary texts, introduced as part of academic writing classes. Finally, developing academic criticism may be assisted, for example, by in-class analysis of articles published serially (a-response-to articles) or academic reviews.

An important caveat to this discussion is that this paper should not be read as a call for turning away from study skills or, in particular, EAP, whose advantages and strengths in the context of Polish university education appear indisputable. Rather, it suggests that it may be useful to incorporate some of the ideas proposed by Academic Literacies on a larger scale than it has so far been practiced.

Reflective questions

Q1: What elements (on the level of language, organisation, and content) would you consider as typical of a Polish-language academic article in your discipline(s) (or any other written academic genre that you consider relevant)?

Q2: What is your attitude to academic criticism and/or disagreement? Do you have any personal experience in this regard, for example, as a non-blind reviewer or as an author of an article which triggered a polemic?

Practical tasks

T1: Compile a small corpus of Polish-language research articles published in reputable academic journals in your students' discipline(s). With your students, identify the elements that you consider characteristic, such as introductory and concluding moves, transitions between ideas, or phrasemes. Confront the findings with what is practiced and/or expected in English.
T2: Choose one article from the corpus and work on the introduction, encouraging students to rewrite it in English in a way that would satisfy English-language conventions of article introductions.
T3: With your students, analyse and discuss a series of polemical articles (e.g., Flowerdew 2008 – Casanave 2008 – Flowerdew 2009), encouraging students to express opinions and share their feelings about the ways in which criticism and approval are expressed.
T4: With your students, analyse a published academic book review, drawing attention to how merits and shortcomings of the work under review are commented on.

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